

Chinese Grammar – A Brief Intro

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This column will *briefly* introduce Chinese grammar. The contents of this article are limited to modern, vernacular Mandarin Chinese. Here is the good news -- in contrast to the writing system, Chinese grammar is simple and straightforward. We'll present "just enough grammar" to get you started. At the same time I'll explain what you would typically see during the first year of Chinese instruction. The explanations and examples will be in English with limited pinyin. Our next column will feature information on how parents can help their children learn a second language.

The purpose of this column is to give you a brief overview of the basic "rules" to keep in mind when trying to form a sentence in Chinese. This isn't a column to burden your child with. Rather, this is intended for adults only! Fortunately, kids approach language learning differently and are less preoccupied with grammatical rules, they just repeat the structures they hear. We adults get bogged down in the semantics because that is the way we have always been taught languages (unfortunately). So, I'm using a format that we are all familiar with to answer some basic questions.

First of all, please keep in mind that Chinese is *REALLY* not as hard as you were led to believe. This discussion of grammar should convince you. Set aside those concerns about conjugation, case, gender agreement, and the grammatical "pitfalls" that slowed you down when studying other languages. In Chinese, your primary concern is with the order of words in a sentence (the syntax). Once you understand the basic sentence patterns, you just plug in new words.

Basic Word Order

Time + Subject + Object (option #1 with particle *ba*) + Place + Verb + Object (option #2).

Subjects & Verbs

Subjects occur before verbs and verbs are not conjugated, nor do they indicate tense. Really, I'm not kidding. Verbs are not conjugated and do not indicate tense!!! Here are some examples:

Yesterday I go to the store, today I go to the store, tomorrow I go to the store, GO never changes.

Further: *he go to the store, I go to the store, we go to the store.* Again, the verb *NEVER* changes in Chinese.

Incomplete & Completed Actions - not the same as tense

In Chinese you have incomplete and completed actions. A completed action, "yesterday I went to the store" would read:

Yesterday, I go to the store “le.”

The use of the special word “le” at the end of a sentence or after a verb indicates that the action is finished or completed. The use of le can be a little more complicated, but for now this is a sufficient explanation. Please note that le is pronounced with a short vowel, not a long “eeee” sound.

Objects

Next, objects can appear at the beginning (before the verb) or after the verb. If an object appears at the beginning of a sentence/phrase, you just add a special word next to the object. This special word is “ba.” A sample sentence would look like this:

*Cassandra, please “ba” pencil pick up. Or
Cassandra, please pick up that pencil.*

Nouns, Numbers & Measure Words

There is NO PLURAL, GENDER, or CASE agreement in Chinese. Yippee!!! A noun is a noun is a noun; no matter where it occurs and how it is modified. If you want to indicate that you have more than one of something, like cars, you say exactly how many or indicate that you have a few.

There are special “measure words” that accompany nouns when counting or indicating an amount. These “measure words” are words that indicate categories of shape, size, or other characteristics. So different types of nouns are usually associated with specific measure words. These can be difficult for non-Chinese speakers to grasp since they do not typically occur in western languages, but when you get used to using them in conjunction with their partnered nouns, they become natural over time. Just keep in mind that measure words are like saying you have a “pair of pants.” Pair in this phrase is a measure word. If you don’t know a specific measure word you can always fall back on the generic measure word “ge.”

3 “ge ” table (remember that you don’t need to change the noun to indicate a plural, so no “s” at the end in Chinese)

3 “zhang” table

Here are some good resources for measure words:

<http://www.chinese-outpost.com/language/grammar/gram0020.asp>

http://en2.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Chinese_measure_words

<http://www.all-day-breakfast.com/chinese/big5.cgi?page=measure-words.html&simpleform=1&simpleaction=nothing>

Adverbs & Adjectives

Adverbs generally occur before verbs but can also be located after with additional modifiers:

slow go. Go slow.

go slow a little. Go a little slowly.

Adjectives are usually indicated by the particle "de" (which also makes a word possessive by the way).

Red "de" balloon. Red balloon.

Beautiful "de" girl. Beautiful girl.

I"Wo" "de" balloon. My balloon.

Time

Time words always occur at the beginning of a sentence. So, if you are going to the store tomorrow, you say:

Tomorrow I'm going to the store. Notice that the time word is *in the beginning of the sentence*. Here's another example.

Now, what time is it? In Chinese, because "now" is a time word, it goes before the question "what time is it?"

Place & Location

Place has a special "location" within the sentence. Place words are usually accompanied by a word indicating that you are "in" that location or headed "toward" that location. There is some wiggle room here but the general pattern is below:

I "zai" school. I am at school. (Subject + location)

I "dao" school go. I am going to school. (Subject + location + verb)

How to Form Questions

There are 3 primary ways to ask questions in Chinese:

- using a question word such as "what, where, why, how, or when,"
- negating the verb "go not go,"
- by adding the question word "ma" or the phrase "le mei you" to the end of a sentence.

You "dao" where go? Where did you go?

You "dao" China go "bu" (not) go? Did you go to China?

You "dao" China go "ma?" Did you go to China?

You "dao" China go "le mei you?" Did you ever go to China?

Resources

Ok, now you know the basics of Chinese grammar - REALLY! We searched for a basic overview of Chinese grammar that would provide clear explanations in English accompanied by characters and pinyin. This was no mean feat. Here are some websites for further reading:

<http://www.chinese-outpost.com/language/grammar/> (my personal favorite)

http://en2.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_grammar

<http://tecfa.unige.ch/staf/staf-e/sun/staf15/cgrammar/cgrammer.html>

http://www.expatsinchina.com/studentlink/chinese_grammar.htm